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What Does Jesus Mean When He Says, "These People Honor Me with Their Lips"?

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In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus confronts the Pharisees and teachers of the law with a powerful indictment: *"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me"* (Matthew 15:8). This statement, originally found in Isaiah 29:13, addresses the discrepancy between outward religious practices and inward spiritual reality. Understanding this message is crucial for believers today, as it calls us to examine the authenticity of our faith and worship.

In Matthew 15, Jesus addresses the Pharisees and scribes who criticize His disciples for not adhering to traditional ceremonial hand-washing. Jesus responds by pointing out their hypocrisy, accusing them of valuing human traditions over God's commandments. He uses the prophecy from Isaiah to highlight that their worship is superficial; they follow rituals and speak of God, but their hearts are not truly devoted to Him.

The Bible repeatedly emphasizes that God desires sincere worship from the heart rather than mere external compliance. In 1 Samuel 16:7, God reminds Samuel that He looks at the heart, not the outward appearance. Similarly, Jesus teaches that true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). This means that our actions and words must be a reflection of our inner love and commitment to God, rather than just a façade.
Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees serves as a warning against hypocrisy. Hypocrisy in worship can lead to a form of godliness but deny its power (2 Timothy 3:5). It creates a disconnect between professed beliefs and actual behavior, which can mislead others and damage one's relationship with God. In Matthew 23, Jesus pronounces a series of woes against the Pharisees for their hypocritical practices, emphasizing the gravity of this sin.

Applying This Teaching to Today's Trends

In our contemporary world, the church is often inundated with individuals who display outward signs of faith but whose lives contradict the principles of Christianity. False prophets, who distort the Gospel for personal gain, abound, leading many astray with teachings that prioritize prosperity over genuine spiritual growth. This mirrors the warning in 2 Peter 2:1-3 about false teachers exploiting believers with fabricated stories.

Public workers who engage in corruption, NGO workers who steal beneficiaries' entitlements, and businesspeople who deceive customers with false prices or counterfeit goods are prevalent. These actions are starkly at odds with biblical teachings about honesty and integrity. Proverbs 11:1 says, *"The Lord detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favor with him,"* highlighting God's disdain for deceit.

Even within the church, many professing Christians engage in religious activities for self-serving reasons. They may participate in prayer meetings, visit the needy, join the choir, or preach, but their motives are often to gain accolades and impress others rather than to serve God sincerely. This is reminiscent of the Pharisees whom Jesus criticized for performing religious acts to be seen by others (Matthew 6:1-6).

Are We Really Saved? Religious or Christians?

The distinction between being religious and being a true Christian is vital. A religious person may adhere to rituals, attend church services, and engage in good deeds, yet lack a genuine relationship with Christ. In contrast, a true Christian seeks to follow Christ wholeheartedly, allowing their faith to transform their actions and attitudes.

James 2:14-26 emphasizes that faith without works is dead, indicating that true faith results in actions that align with God's will. However, these actions must stem from a transformed heart, not from a desire for recognition or personal gain. As Jesus taught, *"By their fruit, you will recognize them"* (Matthew 7:20), meaning that the evidence of genuine faith is seen in the fruits of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, and kindness (Galatians 5:22-23). These works should be guided by the Holy Spirit, as per Ephesians 2:10, and not be human efforts to earn salvation by simply fulfilling the law.

To avoid superficial worship

To avoid superficial worship, it is essential to first be transformed by a genuine relationship with Christ. Regularly examine our heart and assess our motives for worship and service. As 2 Corinthians 13:5 advises, *"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves."* Ask ourselves if we are seeking to honor God or to be seen by others, in line with Colossians 3:23, which states, *"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters."*

Engaging in personal devotion is also crucial; spend time in prayer, Bible study led by the Holy Spirit to deepen our relationship with God. Psalm 1:2 highlights the importance of this practice: *"But whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night."*

Additionally, practice what we preach by ensuring our actions align with our beliefs. James 1:22 exhorts, *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."* This authenticity will strengthen our faith and positively impact those around us.

Finally, we should seek accountability by surrounding ourselves with fellow believers who can provide support and honest feedback about our spiritual walk. Hebrews 10:24-25 encourages this communal support: *"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

Conclusion

Jesus' words in Matthew 15:8 remind us of the need for genuine faith and worship. They challenge us to move beyond superficial religious practices and cultivate a heartfelt devotion to God, fulfilling the greatest commandment: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37).

In the parable of the ten virgins, Jesus illustrates the importance of being prepared for His return. The wise virgins took oil in their jars along with their lamps, symbolizing genuine salvation and an ongoing relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit. When the bridegroom arrived, only the wise virgins were ready and entered the wedding banquet, while the foolish virgins were left outside (Matthew 25:1-13). This parable warns that merely appearing to be a follower of Christ is not enough. Genuine salvation requires a true, transformative relationship with Jesus. As Matthew 7:21-23 teaches, not everyone who calls Jesus 'Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of the Father. Jesus will say to many, *"I never knew you,"* even if they performed works in His name. This underscores the necessity of a sincere and intimate relationship with Christ.

Let us, therefore, commit to sincere and wholehearted worship, honoring God in spirit and in truth. As we approach the end times and wait for the bridegroom, let us ensure our salvation is genuine, lest we soon become like the foolish virgins or hear Jesus declare, *"I never knew you."*

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